DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 424 747 FL 025 521

AUTHOR Jones, Nathan B.
TITLE When EFL Writing Students Draft Oral Histories.
PUB DATE 1998-08-00
NOTE 45p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Conference of the National Council of Teachers of English (3rd, Bordeaux, France, August 6, 1998).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Advanced Courses; College Instruction; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Oral History; Second Language Instruction; *Writing Exercises; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Taiwan

ABSTRACT

Encouraging students of English as a foreign language (EFL) to write family oral histories is an excellent way to teach academic writing and spark student interest. Oral history is defined, steps in writing oral histories are outlined, advantages and disadvantages of having undergraduate EFL composition students draft them are examined, and examples of student oral histories are described. References to student work are from family oral history papers completed by 30 EFL students enrolled in a one-semester advanced writing class in Taiwan. Students' evaluative comments about using oral histories to teach EFL composition are drawn from routinely-administered post-course surveys, which ask what students liked and disliked about the course and their recommendations for change. Excerpts of student writing are included. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 424 747

When EFL Writing Students Draft Oral Histories

Nathan B. Jones
Department of Foreign Languages
National Tsinghua University
Hsin Chu, Taiwan
R.O.C.

A paper presented on August 6, 1998 in Bordeaux, France at the National Council of Teachers of English 3rd International Conference (Global Conversations on Language and Literacy)

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Nathan B Jones

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

FL025521

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

When EFL Writing Students Draft Oral Histories

Nathan B. Jones
National Tsinghua University
Hsin Chu, Taiwan

Introduction

Learning to write in a foreign language is hard work. To become good at it requires much time, energy, and courage. Perhaps for these reasons, EFL students may approach their required EFL composition classes with trepidation, even annoyance. This poses a problem for EFL writing teachers. As Roen (1989) points out, "We are, after all, professional wordsmiths--people with a special affection for writing. Most people do not share our love for the written word" (pp. 194-195).

My classroom experience tends to support Roen's observation. On the first day of one recent EFL composition class, by a show of hands, 12 out of 20 students indicated that if given the choice, they would choose not to take an EFL composition class.

As the teacher of a required undergraduate course in advanced EFL composition for foreign language majors at National Tsinghua University of Taiwan, I have found that motivating students to want to write well is an important, perennial challenge. Nevertheless, I have found that encouraging them to draft family oral histories can be an excellent way to teach academic writing and to spark student interest and commitment.

In this paper I will briefly introduce oral history, describe the steps to write an oral history, discuss some of the advantages and disadvantages of having undergraduate EFL composition students draft oral histories, and conclude by describing some examples of student oral histories.

References to student work are from family oral history papers recently completed by 30 EFL undergraduate students enrolled in two sections of my semester-long advanced writing class. Their evaluative comments about using oral histories to teach EFL composition are from post-course surveys that I routinely administer on the last day of each class I teach. The open-ended post-course survey asks each student to respond freely and anonymously to the following questions: (1) What did you like about the course? (2) What did you dislike about the course? (3) What changes would you recommend to improve it?

What Is Oral History?

"Oral history" describes the process of identifying an activity or period of interest, interviewing participants or first-hand observers for their in-depth accounts, recording the oral accounts using audio equipment, video equipment, or print, cross-checking the oral accounts with other oral accounts and printed documents, interpreting the oral accounts for any trends or patterns that may emerge, and writing up the results of the study for public presentation (Thompson, 1988; Yow, 1994).

Oral history has long roots. Since pre-literate times, members of oral cultures have shared narratives of human activities to "communicate much of what they know" (Ong, 1982, p. 140). With the advent of writing, scholars have been able to leave more permanent, detailed records. In the fifth century B.C., Thucydides became perhaps the first true oral historian, as he sought out, interviewed, and recorded the experiences of people for their first-hand accounts of the Peloponnesian War (Yow, 1994).

By the nineteenth century, historical scholarship had a long-established tradition of focusing on the study of written documents. Nevertheless, when he wrote his *History of the French Revolution,* Jules Michelet, who had lived through the horrors of that era and had interviewed other participants, rekindled respect for and interest in the power of oral history (Thompson, 1988). Recently, oral history has been used to learn about the cultures and lifestyles of more common folk, including working women, housewives, children, blue-collar workers, and ethnic-religious minorities (Casey, 1993; Shields, 1992; Smith, 1989).

Steps in Writing an Oral History

Teaching students to draft an oral history of a family member can help prepare them to draft nearly any academic paper. Just as we generally understand the process of writing to be recursive, I also teach my EFL composition students that drafting an oral history is recursive. Hence, the sequence of

research and writing steps recommended below is intended to be a guide; I encourage students to revisit steps of the sequence at any time, or to skip steps temporarily, as the situation requires.

1. Identify a general topic. Each student must research and write an oral history about an important event in the life of a loved one, such as a grandparent, a parent, an aunt, an uncle, or a close friend. By asking students to research and write about someone meaningful, they begin the assignment with heightened interest and commitment to do a good job. I encourage their commitment by often reminding them to write a history worthy of their chosen family members.

2. Read supporting literature and conduct exploratory interviews. Oral historians often benefit from collecting background information about their topics prior to conducting interviews. As Thompson (1988) writes, "It is nevertheless generally true that the more one knows, the more likely one is to elicit significant historical information from an interview" (p. 197). Therefore, I require that each oral history paper include some appropriate references to relevant print documents, such as articles from newspapers, magazines, and journals.

3. Draft an interview guide. Once students have identified a general topic and have collected some relevant background information, they are ready to write an interview guide, a basic list of questions to be used during interviews.

The interview guide is very important in oral history research, because it helps to focus the interviews, to collect important information, and to organize the data-collection process. I also advise students to supplement the interview guide with appropriate, interesting questions that may pop into their minds just prior to or during interviews. According to Yow (1994), "This flexibility allows the narrator to teach the interviewer things he or she did not already know, while ensuring that the information the interviewer sought also is obtained" (p. 36). Although guides could be of any length, I encourage students to write a list of at least 10 questions they would probably ask each person to be interviewed.

4. Identify suitable informants. An obvious informant would be the subject of the study: Mom, Dad, Grandma, Grandpa, etc. Unfortunately, memories fade and facts are sometimes distorted, so information from primary informants must be supplemented and confirmed with other sources, oral or written. For this reason, I require students to interview at least two other people familiar with the general topic.

5. Conduct interviews. Conducting good, in-depth interviews is essential. Informants should provide their version of events and attribute their own meanings. The researcher should assume the role of facilitator, guiding the informant to stay within the boundaries of the general topic, but never limiting the informant's interpretation or recounting of relevant events. The good oral historian allows

informants considerable leeway in answering questions, allows them to interject relevant details and ideas, adjusts the focus of the interview to pursue new and interesting information, and monitors informants for non-verbal behavior that might indicate displeasure, stress, or anger with questions. We discuss these issues at length in class and roleplay possible ways to handle good and bad interview situations.

6. Translate/transcribe data. Once interviews have been recorded on audiotape, the data must be transcribed for later analysis (Yow, 1994). Most of my students interview their informants in Mandarin or another Chinese dialect; therefore, they have the added burden of translating their transcriptions into written English. This could become prohibitively time consuming, especially when diligent students collect 10 or more hours of audiotaped interviews. To ease the burden, I advise them to transcribe and translate only those parts of interviews that are most closely linked to their research interests.

7. Interpret transcribed data. Writing an oral history is much more than just recording dates and events. At some point, the students need to examine the data they have collected for trends, to seek answers to questions about how their relatives found the strength and courage to survive or to prosper in challenging times (Thompson, 1988; Yow, 1994). As they search for ways to interpret the information

collected, students often find it helpful to read articles from magazines, newspapers, and journals for comparisons of how others have managed to cope in difficult situations. Insights from the literature can be very helpful for interpreting the interview data.

8. Write the first draft. Shortly after the middle of the semester I ask students to hand in to me their initial drafts. These early drafts are generally not very good, as some students are still collecting interview data. Nevertheless, the deadline encourages them to work hard on the assignment. After the drafts are handed in, I write a critique of each as an oral history and an EFL writing assignment. In my comments, which often extend to a full page, I point out areas needing more work, particularly in regard to focus, organization, cohesion, logical development, persuasive evidence, and general format.

9. Conduct peer reviews. Prior to returning copies of first drafts to students with my comments, I have them randomly exchange separate copies of their first drafts for a peer review session. I advise them to read a classmate's paper, write a critique of it for homework, and bring two copies of the critique to class the following week--one copy for the author of the paper and the other for me. Using this method, I can monitor the quality of comments students write for each other and ensure that the critiques are completed. To guide students in their comments, I provide a peer review

sheet, which provides a list of open-ended questions about the general quality of the oral history paper. During the next class session, the students have one hour of class time to present their reviews in conferences with classmates.

10. Conduct teacher-student conferences. When the peer reviews are finished, I return the first drafts with my comments and promptly schedule 30-minute conferences with each student to respond to specific questions, challenges, or concerns they may have. To ease the burden conferences place on my time, and to provide as many conferences as possible at times convenient for the students, I usually schedule four hours of regular class time in which to conduct individual conferences with each section of 15 to 20 students.

11. Complete multiple revisions. Prior to handing in their final drafts, students must revise their papers thoroughly. Many revise more than once. Oral and written feedback from a peer, combined with oral and written feedback from the teacher, gives students many ideas about how to improve their papers.

12. Deliver an oral Report. Research is incomplete until it is shared. Usually, in the final two class sessions, I invite each student to share research findings by delivering a 10-minute summary in English of the oral history paper. This also provides closure for the class by showing how each student was able to complete an interesting oral history.

Benefits of Writing Family Oral Histories

Teaching EFL writing students how to draft oral histories offers several compelling pedagogical benefits.

1. It increases the personal commitment of students to perform well in writing class. The students are not writing about abstract issues, but about the life experiences of people they know and love. This tie between the composition class and their outside world is a strong motivator for many. One student wrote that she had carefully revised her paper about her mother a dozen times before feeling satisfied with it. In the passage below, another student comments on her motivation to write a good oral history about her grandmother:

> *And then during the interviews with my families, I heard stories of my grandmother that made me moved and shocked. In that minute of time, I realized the relationship between me and my family had changed subtlely. I found the intimacy between us, and I found most of us have the same essence in our blood that makes us have a similar characteristic. This discovery drove me to write the oral history as well as I could. This writing became not just a exercise in composition class, it became a very important document to me and my family.*

2. It provides opportunities for students to communicate using all of the major language skill areas. English listening comprehension is exercised in lectures, conferences, and peer reviews; speaking ability in conferences, peer reviews, and oral reports; reading ability in assigned textbook readings and the collection of library materials; translation ability in the processing of the taped interviews; and writing and reading ability in the drafting of the paper.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

3. It supports the process approaches of teaching writing. Students are encouraged to explore topics freely with peers and the teacher, to collaborate with classmates in critiquing the papers of one another, to negotiate modifications of the paper with the teacher during personal conferences, and to consult with different readers--in this case the teacher and classmates--about the potential effects of writing on audience.

4. It supports the product approaches of teaching writing. Students develop and follow a general research and writing plan for completing the paper, they are given sample oral histories to study and use as potential models for form, they complete as homework supplementary grammar and sentence-combining exercises to improve their control of language, they are expected to edit their final drafts for any grammar, spelling, and punctuation mistakes, and they know they will receive a comprehensive grade that will assess the quality of the final draft.

5. It encourages learner autonomy by empowering students to perform their own comprehensive research. They learn how to conduct in-depth interviews at home to gather oral data. In addition, we spend class time learning basic skills of finding and using printed materials in the library, and they spend several hours in the library by themselves hunting for the needed information. By the end of the course, they have first-

hand experience in collecting and applying both library and interview data to write a longer academic paper.

6. It develops research project organization skills. Students must carefully plan their research and writing schedules well in advance in order to complete their papers on time. They need to collect background material from the library, conduct interviews with family members, transcribe and translate recordings, analyze their recorded data, participate in peer reviews and teacher conferences, and revise papers to achieve a final draft. Even for good writers, oral histories cannot be "cranked out" the night before they are due. In the following quotation, a student comments on the challenge and the benefit of learning to organize her oral history project:

In the process of doing the oral history paper, I experience what I have never done before, to interview some persons I didn't know well, to think about the questions for interviews, and to organize the material from interviews to write a whole new paper. Although several steps for writing the paper are not directly for us to learn how to write, like preparations for the interviews, they are good for thinking. To think deeply is good for writing a useful composition. As for organization for such topic, it's a new try for me to overcome. I am glad I can finish this oral history paper and learn the experience I had never met before.

Teaching EFL writing students how to draft oral histories also offers them several personal benefits.

1. The final product provides students and their families with a meaningful keepsake. Although as EFL writing students their papers would lack the depth of articles published by professional historians, their works are still

valuable, being highly treasured by the students and their families. Students may perceive their finished papers to be family treasures, as this student comment reveals:

Furthermore, before writing this paper, I didn't know the details of my father's early life. However, this assignment do me a favor to understand my father better. By interviewing him, we talked a lot, and it makes us love each other more. Besides, recording his words down makes me have something to keep forever.

2. Students learn to enjoy history, to appreciate its importance in their lives, often for the first time. They discover how their families have been directly influenced by history, and have contributed to it. They learn about the former lifestyles of their elders: the struggles, the sacrifices, the joys, and the values. They learn that historical events such as annexations, invasions, civil wars, famines, and economic depressions are more than facts to be memorized for a test; rather, these are experiences their grandparents and parents have survived. One student reflected upon her newer understanding of history:

Ordinary blokes as we will never have a chance to show up in a history book or a Who's Who. However, after starting my oral history project, I realized gradually that a complete picture of history is made up of various and different stories, including farmers', labor workers', housewives', salespersons', and even crazy people's.

3. The writing of oral histories often strengthens family ties. The students cannot conduct the research alone. They need the support of friends and family to gather helpful information. They probe into signficant life experiences of family elders, often for the first time, and vicariously

experience the pain, joy, fear, and anger of the event. After completing family oral histories, students have frequently commented on the closer family ties that result from the research. This experience is reflected in the following student observation:

You think you know someone pretty well in your family, but actually you don't. Everyone has his or her own personal experiences and life stories and you won't know them unless you try to discover them. You would be amazed of how little you know when you interview your dearest grandfather or grandmother. You would not only know, but also learn from their life experiences. By doing the interview for your oral history project, you will feel that you become closer to the one you interviewed. Your relationship may become more intimate after this interview and you'll also learn more from his or her life. So the relationship will be better, and, moreover, there's a good educational meaning in your oral history paper.

4. Having students write oral histories encourages them to take pride in their communities, to be good citizens. They draw closer to their own families and, by extension, to the larger community. This benefit is described below by a student:

I am glad to have such a chance to know the history of my family and learned how to write an oral history paper. I think if our society uses oral history as culture education source, it would be such a wonderful way to teach our citizen to respect ancestors and to love this ground. It is when people begin to know more about the history of their family or country, they begin to have more affection toward it.

Disadvantages of Writing Family Oral Histories

Perhaps any teaching approach will have its limitations and critics, and using oral history to teach EFL writing is no exception. Some of the more important criticisms of this approach are discussed in this section.

1. EFL writing class is not supposed to be oral history class. Bearing this in mind, critics might argue that spending class time on the procedures of conducting family oral history research deprives students of the lessons they may need to improve their academic writing.

In response, I would argue that although EFL writing class should not be sacrificed to become an oral history class, for advanced EFL writing students, good academic writing must include a research base, as the purpose of nearly any academic paper is to inform or to persuade. Therefore, teaching undergraduate EFL students how to collect, organize, and apply evidence from family oral history research introduces them to academic interview and library research, giving them the experience and confidence needed for other challenging academic research and writing projects.

2. EFL writing students generally lack the appropriate training to conduct acceptable oral history research. According to this argument, scholars of oral history must spend many hours in graduate-level courses learning how to conduct professional oral history research. Therefore, how could EFL writing students be expected to write professional oral histories, given their limited training?

Admittedly, when compared to the papers written by a professional historian, the family oral histories of undergraduate EFL composition students will seem lacking. Nevertheless, they can still be taught how to write oral

histories, they can be challenged to do their very best work, and they can be praised when their writing shows improvement.

3. EFL writing teachers lack the appropriate training to teach students how to conduct oral history research. Fortunately, EFL teachers untrained in oral history research can still prepare themselves to teach oral history as a research technique for undergraduate EFL writing classes. For example, local undergraduate and graduate programs in history may offer courses in how to conduct historical research, which would probably include oral history. Otherwise, EFL writing teachers may prepare themselves by reading published oral histories and by studying reference books available about how to conduct oral history research. To gain some practical experience in this field, as well as to develop model writings for students to examine, EFL writing teachers could research and write oral histories about issues and events involving their own family members.

4. Some EFL writing students may lack the desire or the ability to conduct family oral history research. Perhaps they have problematic relationships with important family members, or they are now living far away from their nearest relatives, making it difficult to conduct the research. In these cases, I advise them to focus their oral history research on a key issue or event involving a local friend, such as a favorite teacher, professor, artist, minister, or community leader.

Conclusion: Selected Titles

Unlike some other kinds of student papers I have read, family oral histories are seldom boring. Students generally select interesting, even amazing stories to share, and they usually take pride in their work. Perhaps for these reasons, teaching EFL students how to draft oral histories is often interesting and exciting, both for the teacher and for the students.

I would like to conclude this article by providing a list of titles and brief summaries of five excellent oral history papers recently completed by my students. I mention these five because they illustrate the power of EFL writing students, when challenged, to draft interesting, thoughtful family oral histories.

1. "My Maternal Grandmother's Decision to Join the Army and Her Military Life" describes how the author's grandmother, as a young woman, served as a combat soldier in the Kuomintang army in mainland China during World War II. The author focuses on the patriotism that motivated her grandmother to volunteer for front-line duty and the role of women of that era in the Chinese armed forces.

2. "The Struggle of a Wife without Her Husband" describes how the author's grandmother became a widow during World War II in Japanese-occupied Taiwan and struggled alone to support a family of over 10 children. The author examines

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

the harshness of life for Taiwanese women near the end of Taiwan's colonial era.

3. "A Father with Six Daughters" discusses how the author's parents, in their desire to have just one son to continue the family's name, bore and raised six daughters instead. The author explores the social pressure placed upon parents in Taiwan to have male heirs and the lower status of women in modern Chinese society.

4. "From Mishaps to Enlightenment" describes how a physically unattractive, middle-aged aunt with limited education and lower social status in Taiwan chose to become a Budhist nun, and the happiness this decision has brought her. The author examines the importance of free will in women's lives and the potential of religion to bring joy and meaning to life.

5. "A Modern Fairy Tale" describes the situation and the reasons for a husband and wife to divorce, then later to reconcile. Writing about the experience of her own parents, the author explores the pressures of modern life in Taiwan on husbands and wives and some likely sources of misunderstanding and conflict in marriage.

References

Casey, K. (1993). *I answer with my life: Life histories of women teachers working for social change.* New York: Routledge.

Ong, N.J. (1982). *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word.* New York: Methuen.

Roen, D.H. (1989). Developing effective assignments for second language writers. In D.M. Johnson & D.H. Roen (Eds.), *Richness in writing* (pp. 193-206). New York: Longman.

Shields, J. (Ed.). (1992). *All our labours: Oral histories of working life in twentieth century Sydney*. Marrickville, NSW: Southwood Press.

Smith, A. (1989). *Women remember: An oral history*. New York: Routledge.

Thompson, P. (1988). *The voice of the past: Oral history* (2nd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.

Yow, V.R. (1994). *Recording oral history: A practical guide for social scientists*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Appendix

Provided below are the full texts of four sample student oral histories.

Paper (1) *My Maternal Grandmother's Decision to Join the Army*

When Japan invaded China at the 25th year of the Republic of China, the War of Resistance against Japan broke out a year later. Many Chinese volunteers participated in the army, in spite of the gender, age, or the provincial background. The enthusiastic youth coming from the whole country fought for their beloved nation and attacked the Japanese.

During the war, my grandmother was still a young woman, but she left her hometown and made up her mind to participate in the army. I can imagine it was a hard decision for my grandmother to make. She was born in a wealthy family, and her "grandfather" had been an official for the Ching Dynasty. Because of this, all members of her family objected to her plans and demanded that she stay home. However, my grandmother

is a kind of Tom boy, according to the name she describes herself, very macho, so she considered it to be timid and cowardly to conceal herself at home when other members of her family, like her brothers and cousins, went fighting for the nation. On account of this, she insisted on her own decision and enlisted in the army at last.

Me: *Had you encountered any difficulty when you discussed your decision with your family?*

Grandmother: *Of course I had inquired of my parents' opinions and hoped they would support me unanimously. However, my father first objected to this proposal because he thought a girl should stay at home, making some handicrafts or something like that, especially during the violent war time. To my surprise, my mother supported me much more than my father and helped me to persuade my father to let me go.*

Me: *Why did you want to join the army at such a violent time, even when you were so young?*

Grandmother: *I think I am an active woman by nature. When my country was in trouble, I would like to devote something and even myself to it because I will feel myself useful or helpful at that time. Maybe owing to this feeling, I joined the army, even when I was very young.*

She told me that in the military camp about 4-5 persons were in a group. These comrades were supposed to take their turns keeping watch at night. She recalled the situation at that time; the atmosphere was rather nervous and tense,

especially at night. All of the soldiers had to guard at night.

Me: *What was the organization of the army? Was the military life hard?*

Grandmother: *As for the camp I belonged to, there were about 4-5 persons in a group. These members moved altogether. In the daylight, they worked, and they also had to take turns to keep watch at night. In general, the life is not as hard as I had imagined originally.*

When it was my grandmother's turn, she brought a handgun, two spears, and a dagger with her and started going on patrol. There were several areas under the military's jurisdiction. To my grandmother's pride, one time while she was making an inspection tour as usual, she found two suspicious men and shot one right away. When she brought the injured man back with her, it was found that the two men were both spies who worked for the Japanese, the so-called traitors of China.

Me: *Had you shot people, like scoundrels, thieves, and robbers during army time?*

Grandmother: *I remembered one time it was my turn to take a patrol at night. I was high-spirited and excited about this task. In the daytime I had always felt something great would happen. And it was proven. On my patrol, I found two suspicious men, moving stealthily in front of me. I doubted their intentions, because in such a late night, why would they appear? I caught them and one of them intended to run, I*

warned him, watching him continue running, so I shot him in' the leg. Finally, he tumbled down and I caught him easily. It was dangerous, but I still did it. After I came back to the military camp, the captain praised me very much because the fact is the two men proved to be spies for Japan, the traitors to China. Whenever I thought of this, I feel very proud, even until now. but at that time, I myself was also stunned by the resonant sound made by the gun. I could not deny that I was also scared at the same time as well as the injured spy.

She still remains excited to some degree when she describes the event, because it was her first time to shoot a person. She was also scared by the resonant and piercing sound given out by the gun. "It was dangerous," she said, "but I still did it!" Besides this, the females also had to knit sweaters or some clothes for the soldiers in the front-line. She remembers Mrs. President, Madame Suong, had praised and encouraged these courageous and diligent women, and she herself had even worked knitting with them together.

Me: *Did you have any special memories or meet any important events and guys during those days?*

Grandmother: *One of my deepest impressions is one time Madame Suong, Mrs President, had made her rounds to visit us; she was very kind, admirable; she praised us for devoting for the nation and encouraged us to keep on working for our great China. Then, she even had worked with us, knitting sweaters or something else to send for the soldiers in the front-line. All*

of us, especially the female comrades, were in a very high-spirited mood that day, making up our minds to do better for the nation.

Furthermore, she had witnessed the violence and brutal behavior the Japanese soldiers had done to the innocent Chinese common people. She felt furious and was enraged about the cruelty of these Japanese, and even now she still hates Japanese much more than anyone else in our family. She remembered deeply how all of the Japanese officers let their soldiers have their own way when they had occupied a city, a county, etc. These soldiers raped women, even pregnant women, killed whoever they met, including babies, slaughtered and robbed the people, and they could invent every cruel and abnormal method to make a Chinese die. It is very sick to know the whole event in detail. Until now, she still wonders why our last President, Chiang Zhong-Zheng, would like to give up the opportunity to revenge these wicked Japanese soldiers when we had beaten Japanese after the eight years of Sino-Japanese War. Our last President Chiang didn't ask any compensation for the huge destruction of our nation and escorted the Japanese soldiers back to Japan safely. This is what my grandmother feels very confused about and disagrees with the President until nowadays.

At last, my grandmother has told me that if she could lead her life again, she would still make the same decision, never changing her mind of defending her nation.

Me: *In your late life, did you want to make the same decision as before when you were young? Or did you regret something before?*

Grandmother: *I think I would never regret for making the decision. If I could lead my life again, I still would make the same choice. The only thing I regretted may be I didn't as gently persuade my father to let me go as I could. I did feel sorry for this thing. It was an unpleasant memory when I recalled it. Anyway, I would not change my mind to enlist in the army.*

Finally, I want to discuss my grandmother's personality. I consider that she is very brave at that time. Even though she is not the most courageous, I believe she is rather outstanding at the age compared with her contemporaries. On the contrary, nowadays, many people are selfish and eager to make money, concerning not for their nation's welfare, but only for their own interest. For example, since China has been divided into two regimes on account of the different political beliefs around nearly half a century ago, a lot of people are eager to escape from Taiwan, emigrating from Taiwan to the United States or Europe, and become citizens of that country. I think that if there would be a war between Mainland China and the Republic of China, many young people would escape first instead of fighting with the invaders. However, I firmly believe that my grandmother would stay with her country, fighting with the enemies if she still has the strength. In my

opinion, my grandmother can devote herself to the nation when it is in trouble, sacrificing her own interest for her country. Because of this, I assume my grandmother is more gallant and patriotic than many young people nowadays. This is what I admire in her most.

Paper (2) *The Struggle of a Wife without Her Husband*

There are many widows in the world and they might have totally different lives. My grandmother, as a widow, experienced a very hard time during World War II and did all she could do to support her own family and her husband's family, which included 10 other brothers. She devoted herself to the families she both belonged to. For she was a country girl in 1944, who was quiet and seldom complained about the difficulties. Her hard work was the most important reason that she could bring up the children on her own, even without her husband. Good parents always support their children to be successful. Because she was resourceful to find ways to deal with difficult situations, she never gave up to supply a good education for my father and that has helped my father to be a success in his career. Thus, her commitment to families, her quiet acceptance of fate, her hard work and her resourcefulness were the qualities for her life when she became a widow, even though she was just 28 years old.

My grandmother contributed herself to her two families with kind consideration all the time. My grandmother was born in a very poor family in 1914, though there were also many

miserable families at that time. With her two elder brothers, she had to take care of her other three younger sisters. She was aware of the cruel fact, that was, "Don't think about tomorrow, because you have to think about your dinner first." Thus, in such poor conditions, my grandmother married my grandfather without a dowry, and she even had to give money to her own family after she lived in her husband's home. Fortunately, my great-grandfather was so kind a man that he didn't blame my grandmother for the lack of a dowry and for her had to hive money to support her own family, despite how my grandfather's family also needed money, my great-grandfather was understanding of this.

While the Japanese dropped the bombs, the people in Taiwan dared not to till the land. Therefore, they had to eat very unpalatable food--"sun-dried sweet potato." Then it would become a dark color, an ugly object and no more a "sweet potato." There was a tradition in a big family like my grandfather's, that, whenever they started to eat a meal, the eldest had to take the first bowl of the food. And because my grandfather was the eldest son, he and my grandmother would be the first three or four to take the food. They all preferred to eat the bad-tasting things, leaving the better-tasting rice for their children--my two aunts and my father. It was the nature for my grandmother as a mother to be kind towards her children.

Moreover, my grandmother continued to support both families, even after she had lost her husband. Since my grandfather was the eldest son, he had made a very important decision to be a soldier in place of being an officer in the local government. For more money's sake, he forced himself to become a soldier, though he was just in his twenties. After he arrived in the Philippines, no one heard any news from him anymore. My grandmother began her widow's life while she was "still beautiful as a flower in the sunlight," said my father. Though she was only 28 years old, she refused every suitor. My father said with a smile, "If I won the first award in the exam of the Ching dynasty, the Emperor should give my mother a monumental archway to show her chastity."

To be a quiet woman, my grandmother just cared about how to earn more money and worked as hard as possible. As I mentioned above, there were 10 other brothers in this big family. Thus, each of them had a piece of farmland to cultivate rice and received the payment for selling their own rice. My grandmother, as a weak woman, had to get up when the sky was still very black and gray because she couldn't lose the opportunity to fetch the water to irrigate the plants. We all knew that a woman's strength is not like a man's, so my grandmother was afraid to be too late to draw the water from a main irrigation ditch in Tainun. Except for getting up earlier, she couldn't find another way to make a good income.

Drawing water was like a competition because all of the people wanted the water for their crops to keep living at that time.

If my grandmother had never been so resourceful, my father would not be so successful now. Though my grandmother didn't have the chance to be an educated person, she had a very stern mind to provide her own son the best education, no matter what price she should pay. In 1961, the 10 brothers of her late husband, now all adults, wanted to divide their properties; hence, my grandmother not only had to bear the unfair treatment because her husband's property had been taken away from her by his relatives, but also had to make more money to support her own house. The most ironic fact was that all the brothers lived in the same section of the village, but they had no capability to help each other because they even couldn't save themselves from hunger and poverty.

For this reason, my grandmother sent my two aunts to work after they graduated from elementary school just to support my father to finish his education. My aunts as victims of this family all hoped my father would achieve good grades in his studies. Therefore, when he was a student, my grandmother limited his whereabouts and encouraged him to study hard. Also, for his safety, she even didn't allow my father to swim in the river behind their house. My grandmother gave my father two goats to look after to keep him from swimming in the river, and she also told the children in the neighborhood, "If my son wants to swim, you all must tell me

at once. I will punish him immediately." My father also recalls this even by saying my grandmother had run after him through the whole village just wanting to chasten him for swimming in the river. My father said shyly, "That's why I didn't learn how to swim until now."

I think because my grandmother must have been working very hard as she was a young adult, she is in a very good health now. But she never reads books because she never learns how to read. She said it is enough for her to understand how to add or subtract numbers; in any case, she doesn't have to worry about studying because she is so good at farming in the field. Also, she had to do some tedious things, such as working as a temporary worker in a factory, a washer of others' clothes, or a semi-finished goods worker. She never stopped worrying about the sources of the money until my father started his own job. Later, my father found a very good job and married a very good woman to be his wife--my mother. Thus, my grandmother could finally depart from the sufferings, which were like nightmares during her thirties to fifties.

These are the overviews of my grandmother's early life. Although I can't say that my grandmother is better than other grandmothers, she is still a great woman, because my father's achievement in life shows this. I'm sure that if she weren't a great woman, then my father couldn't be so successful in his career now a factory manager for the China Oil Company. That's

what my grandmother should be proud of and it is the proper reward for her to enjoy in her life now.

When I asked what her wishes are since she should enjoy the rest of her life, she just only said, "I can't wait to have my great-grandson!"

Paper (3) *A Father with Six Daughters*

A couple of weeks ago, news was reported that some pregnant women gave birth to deformed babies because of using the womb-rinsing technique to know the sex of babies when the mothers were 3 to 4 months pregnant. Furthermore, a doctor said that hundreds of women get abortions after they know they're going to have a girl. According to the news, we know the idea of valuing males above females still exists in modern society.

The concept of valuing males above females plays an important role in my family, especially my father's family. The wish to have a boy results in six daughters in my family and a gap between my mother and my grandmother. No matter how old I am, a question of why I have five sisters has been haunting me and drives me to find the answer. That's why I want to write an oral history about my father, to know why he has so many children and how his six daughters have influenced him.

How did my father meet my mother and how did he have six daughters? It's a long story to tell. My father began to look for a job after graduating from Taichung Senior Agricultural

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

School in 1959. He was not the one who could adjust to that society quickly so that he changed his job constantly. It was not until 1967 that he entered Formosa Chemical Fiber and got a fixed position. In 1968, he met my mother in Taitung when the company sent him there to supervise the purchase of wood. They fell in love so quickly that they decided to get married in the beginning of the following year.

After my mother had become a daughter-in-law, she moved to Feng-yuan, my father's hometown, and my father kept staying in the mountains of Taitung to make money to sustain his old and new family. The first child was born in the end of the same year, and by this chance, my mother went back to Taitung to live with my father until the second child was born. The coming of the first child brought my father an excitement and a new vision to make the life of his family better although his hope of getting a boy was foiled. In the following days, my father and mother lived a happy life without grandmother's complaints, but the life in the mountains was tough, because of the lack of facilities and entertainment. My father explains this situation below:

There was nothing to do when working and living in the mountain, and the life was so inconvenient. Especially when a typhoon came, all the roads were closed. You had to walk down the mountain by foot to buy convenience goods and climbed up with food carried on the back.

Then came the second child. To his disappointment, he got another girl. Mixed with sadness and happiness, he consoled himself that he would have one son next time. Then my mother

went home with "two" daughters to face the frown of my grandmother. We were often told by our maternal grandmother what kind of miserable life my mother lived while keeping company with my paternal grandmother. Maybe this was because my mother couldn't give her a grandson to carry the family name since my father is the eldest son. Ironically, all my second uncle's children are boys.

From 1969 to 1972, my father stayed in Taitung and came home every month. He said:

At that period of time, the only thing I thought was to do my duty and take my responsibility. I really liked to go home, but it's a pity and an inevitability to cost 20% of my salary each time I went home.

Fortunately, he changed his position to the Proposal Reformation Center and was posted to Chang-huah to work in 1972. In the same year, the third child was born--a daughter again. All he could do was to work harder and keep wishing for a boy the next time. He thought that it was impossible to have a fourth daughter.

From 1973 to 1975, my father encountered the most difficult time in his life. The Petroleum Crisis took place all over the world that made many companies take the action of laying off some employees. Formosa Chemical Fiber where my father worked was no exception. He didn't know when his turn would be and whether he could find a job if he was laid off. He recalled:

Everyday, I prayed for good luck and wished to keep my current work. My family worried about it as I did. Besides, I started to plan what to do and how to arrange my redundancy pay if I had to get out of this company.

After the breakup of the Petroleum Crisis, everything was back to normal and my father kept his job, but the adjustment of his salary could not catch up with the rise of the prices. What bothered him most was that there was no amelioration in the family's financial situation. Luckily, all his children were still too young to go to school and didn't cause him too many troubles.

Before 1978, he had another three daughters. This time, he gave up his thought of having a boy finally, because six children meant a large burden for him. In my father's own words:

Six children had already been beyond my ability to support. Even I could have a son in the next fetus, I would not have so much money to bring him up. It's a fact to have six daughters. There was no thought in my mind except to offer them a good living and better education.

There was a short interlude when my father had the sixth daughter. According to my mother's words:

When the child was born, your father dared not to look at this little baby until the following day.

However, the passage of time made children grow older and older and made the room that our whole family lived in and slept in smaller. Our bed couldn't allow eight people to lie down as usual any more, so my father started to look for another space outside. In 1981, he found a house in Taichung

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

and decided to settle down there. Actually, he didn't know that this move did change our lives.

What is his attitude toward his daughters? In the interview with my father, I asked him what expectation he had of us when we were little girls. He said:

I found out that each of you had a different personality, so I didn't want all of you to become the same "somebody." Instead, to help you to develop your interests and aptitudes were what I wanted to do.

And he did practice what he said. Take my eldest sister as an example. When she was in the third grade of elementary school, my father discovered that she had some talent in music and was fond of playing the piano in school. Then, he bought her an organ that was cheaper than a piano. From that moment on, she didn't stop practicing and till now, she is now a student of the Music Department in Catholic College. If my father were like any other parent who wanted to train their children to be outstanding or good at study in schooling, he might have killed his daughter's innateness in music, not to mention the chance to hear her perform.

To know how my father has been influenced by his daughters, I asked him to compare with my uncles, one of whom has three boys and the other of whom has three boys and one girl. He gave me his answer:

Having a boy is good, but having a cute, polite child is better. This is what I feel when I see my nephews. The result of comparing you with them only makes me feel better because you are more outstanding. But I still feel embarrassed when neighbors say "Oh! That family filled with six girls..."

The living of my family has improved, but there are still some difficulties. My father is in his fifties now, but looks older than his age. The time to rest is still far away because there are three children who have not finished schooling yet. In addition, we girls have become ladies who need privacy, and our little three-bedroom house can't make it. One month ago, my parents decided to buy a two-story apartment nearby to let each of us have her own room. Now begins the time of working harder, harder and harder for my father to afford the apartment. The only help we can give is to save unnecessary expenditures.

To know whether he wants his daughters to return to him something when he is old, I asked him what he would like to do and what he wants us to do after his retirement. He said that he wished to find an easy job that can be done at home and to have a little land to grow his favorite plants. He doesn't expect his children to repay him anything, even after they grow up, having financial indepedence and get married.

Cases like my father's experience are common in Chinese society. The old concept of valuing males above females has killed a lot of innocent lives, or killed a chance for women to be somebody. Besides, grown-up people have never thought of that they may be affected by their children, such as giving up the idea that women cannot carry her family's name. On the contrary, they want their children to accomplish their unfinished dreams. At least, as for my father, his six

daughters have changed his stereotype by presenting their own unique qualities.

Paper (4) *From Mishaps to Enlightenment*

My Aunt Shioshia has led a life forlorn by fortune. Being denied of almost all aspects of life's privileges, she has experienced an existence twice as difficult as most people. Education, appearance, marriage, career, none of these are in her favor. In the past, she saw an unhappy, desolate self constantly forgotten in some dark corners. But today, she has found her happiness and the true meaning of life. Religion is the prime mover of this rebirth. She no longer craves for other people's recognition. "I have learned from the Buddhist scriptures to love myself and esteem myself. I am much more confident now," Aunt Shioshia says with pride.

This once pessimistic, now self-assured, Buddhist follower was born on March 1, 1952, as the youngest of six children in the city of Fengshan, Taiwan. She was endowed with the name of Shioshia by her father. When business was prosperous, her father had a second family and two more children. It was not until business failed that he returned to his first wife. Aunt Shioshia remembers that when she was little, there were always many visitors, and people were very nice to them. When poverty struck home at the age of ten, life became miserable. "We moved from place to place because our home was always flooded," she recalled. "I could barely accept the suddent change."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

As a little child, Shioshia was very much loved. She was chubby, pretty and very obedient. Her eldest sister, Shiochu, recalls that she was shy and taciturn. An unfortunate fall from the stairs, however, caused certain damage in her brain, and Shioshia was not able to articulate and react as normal people would. The terrible incident also affected her learning ability. Discouraged as well by her parents to continue her studies, Shioshia never attended junior high school. In such a way, she became destined to a lifetime of labor. She was inferior, when compared with her siblings. Additionally, the long hours of hard work at her young age caused permanent ill health and a scrawny appearance. Shioshia confesses that she was always furious when people wondered at her skeletal shape. She measured about 155 meters high but weighed less than forty kilos. To hide from curious eyes, she kept a sweater on all year long, summers and winters. Shioshia never dared to take it off until the age of forty.

Shioshia's brother recalls that after father's death, his sister became totally dependent on his mother. She was not able to make any decisions on her own or make any arrangements for herself. It was only after their mother died that his sister learned about independence and responsibility. A friend and also a Buddhist follower describes his first acquaintance with Shioshia at the sanctuary:

She looked so modest and polite. She talked and behaved so humbly one would think that she had a sense of interiority, or even imagine she had autism. When she talked to me, she

didn't look into my eyes. She never talked freely in public. I kept wondering why she behaved like that.

When Aunt Shioshia reached a proper age for marriage, she had no close acquaintance with men. During the many occasions in which male companions were introduced to her, she escaped with fear. Her eldest sister thought she had a too high criterion for a perfect husband and thus could not accept those who were introduced to her. Her brother added that despite her sense of inferiority, his sister wanted to win admiration from others by being "well-married." He disapproved of his sister's attitude, for Shioshia herself was neither pretty nor highly educated. However, she refused to have a labor worker for a husband, although she herself was one. Shioshia was very concerned about what people would say about an inferior marriage. As a result, the fact that Shioshia never married remained a significant cause of sorrow in her life.

Shioshia began her life as a labor worker as early as ten, when the economy at home did not seem well. She first started as an asparagus scraper, and there were many times when she had to work until one or two in the morning. Later she joined with a neighbor in a pineapple company, where she worked for more than ten years. "My sister was always persistent and humble in her work. She never liked or asked for changes and was devoted in what she was demanded to do," Shioshia's brother comments. During these 20 years, she was once given a chance to promotion. However, Aunt Shioshia

declined the new position because she did not regard herself competent and qualified.

For some unknown reasons, Aunt Shioshia left the factory, only to find herself another 20 years of hard toil. At Tieng Chung Electronics, she experienced the most unjust and hapless event of her life. Being a devoted worker as she always was, Aunt Shioshia hardly complained about the hard and monotonous work. For 20 years, she was never promoted, and her salary raised in limited amount each year. Her pessimism made her believe that all was fate and, therefore, it was useless to hope for anything better. In addition to all this, Tieng Chung Electronics was facing an economic crisis and was forced to move to a new location. In order to reduce expenses, the company decided to lay off the older and accordingly higher paid workers, and recruit novices with beginners' wages. In this way, Aunt Shioshia was forced to ask for leave in order to receive a humble amount of severance pay. In the face of injustice, Shioshia only lamented at her old age and her employer's need for lower paid and younger workers. Her eldest brother, however, disclosed with fury, "All the while they were making money when their employees were working like animals. After 20 years, one finds only lay-offs. It was such a cruel and unjust treatment. They knew exactly how to deal with non-educated workers like my sister."

Looking back, Aunt Shioshia laughed at her old self, the poor, self-despised girl who thought life was so hard and full

of toil. She kept a humble attitude when meeting people, but her closest friends and relatives knew that she had a very short temper and a straightforward character. Moreover, she was inconsiderate and unforgiving. She always took advice for insults but would never tell. "She wouldn't talk about anything with anyone. When she could not take it anymore, she would smack on her mouth and head. It was terrible," her brother recalls. Not only once did she think about committing suicide. Aunt Shioshia recounts a terrible experience, "Once we had a trip to Keng Ting, the colleagues at Tieng Chung Electronics. I walked to the beach and thought how wonderful it would be to go into the sea and never come back again."

At the age of 34, when life seemed dim and hopeless of any joy, a candle was kindled for Aunt Shioshia. The comprehension in Buddhist scriptures opened the doors for a wholly new existence, one in which life is colored and the self thoroughly reexamined. Buddhism, like a magical power, erased all flaws and misery Aunt Shioshia saw in herself, and taught her confidence and self-esteem. No longer could education, marriage, health, and appearance act as reminders to torture herself. A friend of Shioshia's depicts the significance of her acquaintance with Buddhism:

In the sanctuary we were told about Shioshia's life and other motives that caused her to belittle herself. It is the devotion in to the study of Buddhism and the instruction of the masters that saved and changed Shioshia. We often interpreted what the Buddhist scriptures say about life and its meaning. Shioshia's insight into Buddhism dissolved her old self and created a new one.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

As a matter of fact, Aunt Shioshia could not easily accept the teachings of Buddhism at first. The process of conversion itself meant intense struggle and torture for her, since her pessimistic view of life was so deeply rooted. Aunt Shioshia recalls that at 34, being sick as usual, she met a doctor who advised her to see a way to brightness through religion. However skeptical she was, she did not want to hurt the good intentions of the doctor. In consequence, she made the most significant step in her life. The classes at the sanctuary encouraged followers to speak up and interpret the Buddhist texts. Aunt Shioshia met this challenge with fear and reluctance. "I couldn't possibly bring myself to talk in public. Hence I skipped as many classes as I could. Often I would eat alone and tried to avoid a crowd. I was afraid people would question about my strange behavior." For all that, Aunt Shioshia's self-alienation invited great attention from Master Cheng, who eventually became the incentive to Shioshia's conversion.

Master Cheng Shenhua bears a nature like that of the Buddha, wise and compassionate. He is a favorite and well-known preacher for he is easy to approach and often emphasizes on individual understanding of life and the self. Those greatly influenced by his teachings are immeasurable in number, and Aunt Shioshia belongs to one of them. Master Cheng was determined to see that this lost sheep found her own way. He forced Shioshia to speak in public at times and refrained

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

from doing so when necessary. Finally on an occasion at a large Buddhist meeting, where all followers gathered and practiced moral culture, Aunt Shioshia was asked to speak about her experience after intense meditation. Terrified, yet unable to escape, Aunt Shioshia made it through her first real public speech. Recalling the incident, she says:

I know I didn't speak well. But I did not mind at all. I was immensely shocked to see myself being able to talk. The experience told me that I was as capable as anyone else. It was incredible.

When asked about her new comprehension and attitude toward Buddhism, Aunt Shioshia explained:

The doctrines of Buddhism educate people to look at life through oneself. One should understand the causes and effects of events from the self instead of looking at external means. Through self-evaluation, one will be able to surpass the self and attain a realm of peace and calm. I learned to see my own strengths and those of others as well. It is actually unnecessary to make comparisons with one another, for we all have the same intrinsic good nature.

Every friend and relative could see the change in Aunt Shioshia. She became confident, gay, and hopeful. Her sister Shiochu exclaims, "She does not feel inferior to her siblings anymore, because her education in Buddhism made her more knowledgeable than we are. In fact, she was often delighted to discuss the doctrines of Buddhism with people." Shiochu explains that her sister's devotion to religion was far from being an infatuation. "She knows the difference. She even advises people that infatuation strays from real comprehension, and should be avoided."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

In her understanding that good and bad is only a way to interpret matters, Aunt Shioshia is advancing on a stage of self-perfection. In terms of her single status, she no longer feels lonely or finds the idea of marriage repulsive. "I will be glad to accept a male companion when the opportunity comes; but I am free and satisfied at the present." Despite her illiteracy, Aunt Shioshia is willing to learn as much as she can. Not only did she join English classes, she also signed up for Chinese brush-writing and computer courses. When asked about the injustice at Tieng Chung Electronics, she replies, "I am glad I am given an opportunity to rest a while after the long period of hard work. And thanks to my old company that fired me, I am currently involved a new job that I love and cherish." Aunt Shioshia now works at the Chinese Mahayana Buddhist Association both as a receptionist and a sanitation worker. Shiochu remarks that her sister feels gratitude because she is given an opportunity to make a contribution to her religion.

With regard to her future plans, Aunt Shioshia expresses no need for expectations. She does not worry about a place to go when reaching old age. Aunt Shioshia believes that self-esteem and an optimistic attitude toward life is all important to her. Death, that once agonized her when her mother died, is no longer a misgiving in her life. "What I wish to do now is to scrutinize thoroughly the teachings of Buddha. I should

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

like to improve myself more by understanding the true meaning of life and by never ceasing to see the merits of others."

A once self-despised, hapless soul, deprived of all advantages, has worked through misery to discover the real self-value, not from any external help, but from her own beliefs and industry. The profit of Aunt Shioshia's efforts is neither power, nor wealth, nor name, but the rediscovery of worth during earthly life. Moreover, she, who once thought that all brightness had dimmed for her, is able to kindle hopes for others today. Far from wanting to be an acclaimed celebrity, Aunt Shioshia works to become a Buddhist advocate. She is most willing to share her self-awakening; by extending a helping hand, Aunt Shioshia believes that the many stray, suffering souls who live in the misery like she once did will be saved and converted.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE